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In digital death valley

Net/language -- B@bel, Aymara.org and the Internet as language graveyard

Multilingualism campaigns aiming at lingual diversity on the Internet create a basis for putting a language online but do not manage to reflect upon what kind of environment the Internet, apart from its uniformity, really represents for the respective language and its development.

A look at the Internet is always a look through a magnifying glass at what we generally call globalisation. The Internet accelerates and reinforces the process that is causing everything on our planet to move closer together, that is synchronising, connecting, and interlinking everything. Everything that accompanies this process is made more visible by the Internet — as a consequence of a revelation or a dramatic distortion. Language plays an important role in this connection. After all, the present phase of globalisation is seeing an interrogation and renegotiation of the model within whose framework language was modelled mainly as an ideological construct: the nation–state. This latter was only able to legitimise its homogenising ambitions with a national language — such as Spanish, French or German —, something that was never naturally existent, but had first to be laboriously constructed in the course of nation–building. This process occurred to the detriment of diversity within the respective language system, but also at the expense of other languages. A prime example of this is Spain, whose four languages spoken within its national borders were systematically repressed in favour of Castilian, which was promoted to the national language.

Recently, there has been much talk of languages dying out. According to Andrew Dalby's *Language in Danger*,¹ every week the world loses one more language. At the same time, it is becoming increasingly apparent that a few languages, above all English, are expanding their national and international dominance in an alarming fashion. The geo–political hegemony of the G8 would thus seem to have a linguistic dimension: less competitive nations are dominated not only at an economic–military level, but also at a linguistic level, by a few others — in an echo of colonialism right down to neo–colonialist tendencies.² However much this may explain the homogenising developments in the field of languages at global level, in the end it says little about the present status of language as an ideological construct. After all, the present phase of globalisation is largely shaped not only by powerful nation–states, but also by equally powerful corporations and NGOs, which, as comparatively young global players, do not define their identity within the linguistic domain per se.

In the discourse about the vanishing diversity of languages, this blind spot is also reproduced in the discussion of this topic as it concerns the Internet. The

basic problem lies in the reproduction itself. Certainly, there are offline developments that are reflected in the online sphere — but what is decisive is where the parallels cease, or, to be more precise, where the reflection effect loses its meaning and where the translation begins. It is obvious that in cyberspace communities form that are oriented according to national languages. One tends to turn to Internet services in one's own language; correspondingly, people talk of "virtual language communities on the WWW". What is more, the surveillance of the Internet in countries such as China or Burma sometimes recalls the efforts of the modern nation–state. Initiatives to filter content bring about a nationally–oriented linguistic homogenisation that reconstructs the seemingly anachronistic borders of the territorial state in a purportedly borderless association of networks.

On the other hand, there is the spectre of a world language. In this regard, English is literally on everyone's lips; the Internet, too, has given this spectre refuge. Here, it can unfold its ambition to be present on a global scale under the conditions provided by a medium that not only has the same ambition, but has also come up with a particularly effective mythos in this regard. The multiplier effect has brought into the arena not only admirers, but also detractors. The media theorist Geert Lovink, for example, cites Adorno ("The whole is always the untrue") to underline the fact that "there will never be a united planet with a united humanity speaking only one language".³ A world language has nonetheless become a utopian dream for many "Netizens". It even holds a fascination for those who do not want to see languages dying out. After all, it is based on the idea of a harmonious world community and the promise of becoming part of this community. Lovink implies, however, that these dreamers use globalisation merely as "a cheap excuse" for "no longer having to confront stagnation and boredom at local (and especially national) levels".⁴ But are the people who do get involved at these levels to be heroised unreservedly?

Take the UNESCO project B@bel as an example. It has devoted itself to multilingualism on the Internet and aims to re–civilise the linguistic desert in cyberspace — 90 per cent of Internet content is available in only twelve languages. The desert is to become a blossoming landscape, at least when computerised language recognition emerges from the underdeveloped stage of 400 language systems to approach the 6000 languages used worldwide. Although the diagnosis and aim of this initiative may be correct, the approach is problematic. B@bel — the very name suggests media competence — and the directives that have been announced also seem like measures profiled accordingly. But is the bridging of the digital divide and the substantial improvement of the language–recognition systems really a panacea in this connection? If nothing else, the term "preservation" that is used by the organisers should arouse concern. Whether offline or online, merely "preserving" languages cannot be the aim. What is needed is not museums in which the reptile is preserved in stuffed form because of the lack of oxygen; rather, basic conditions for the existence of a diversity of organisms must be created. The fact that languages are precisely that — organisms — often goes by the board, and probably also in this connection.

The consequence: multilingualism campaigns aiming at lingual diversity on the Internet only create a basis for putting a language online. But they do not manage to reflect upon what kind of environment the Internet, apart from its uniformity, really represents for the respective language and its development. One example is the project Aymara.org — referred to with some pathos as "From High Andes to Cyberspace". This tri–lingual website (Aymara, Spanish,

English) is not just an example of how ethnic minorities can be represented on the Internet, but shows above all that the — in this case ancient — language, which survived the empires of the Incas and the Spaniards, has met its premature death. Premature, because there are still around 1.5 million people who speak the language. Death, because one cannot speak here of a translation tailored to the medium, such as that demanded by Lev Manovich for theory formation, with the intellectual war cry "new media requires a new critical language"⁵ — at best, the Internet has taken on the function of a museum.

The inability to see the problem of languages on the Internet and the problem of Net language as interconnected makes present efforts regarding multilingualism in cyberspace as one-sided as a discussion on language and globalisation that addresses the question of the process that is causing everything on our planet to move closer together, that is synchronising, connecting and interlinking everything, solely in terms of the role of the nation-state.

¹ Andrew Dalby, *Language in Danger: The Loss of Linguistic Diversity and the Threat to Our Future*, Columbia 2003.

² See, for example, Dieter Lesage, "Weird translations. On language, nationalism, federalism and postcolonialism in Belgium", <http://translate.eicpc.net/strands/04/lesage-strands01>

³ Geert Lovink, "Dark Fiber. Auf den Spuren einer kritischen Internetkultur", Bonn 2003, 117.

⁴ Ibid., 118

⁵ Lev Manovich, "The Language of New Media", in *nettime* (ed.), Readme! New York 1999, 46.

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